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REQUEST FOR THE INCLUSION OF AN ITEM IN THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA OF THE FIFTIETH SESSION

MULTILINGUALISM

Letter dated 20 July 1995 from the representatives of Belgium, Burundi, Cape Verde, Djibouti, Egypt, France, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritius, Monaco, Morocco, Niger, Portugal, Romania, Senegal, Togo, Tunisia and Viet Nam to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In conformity with rule 13 (e) of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, we have the honour to request the inclusion in the agenda of the fiftieth session of the General Assembly of an additional item entitled "Multilingualism".

An explanatory memorandum (see annex) and a draft resolution (see appendix) in support of the above request are attached to this letter, in accordance with rule 20 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

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ANNEX

Explanatory memorandum

The fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations should serve to remind us of the fundamental importance of the diversity of cultures in the development of a rich and harmonious international life. On this principle there is general agreement.

In accordance with the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, this principle should be reflected in the Organization's functioning in the equal treatment accorded to the official and working languages of the United Nations.

It sometimes happens, however, that this essential principle of equality is not respected in the different bodies. Various justifications are cited: financial reasons, the unavailability of interpretation or translation services, the urgent nature of the work at hand, and so on.

In the heat of the moment, some delegations may be tempted not to react when asked to waive their right to work in the official language of the Organization chosen by them and to be provided with documentation in that language. In the long term, however, this waiver has a particularly nefarious effect in that it is the embryonic form of a tendency to accept a virtually monolingual United Nations.

Far from being simpler, cheaper or better, failure on the Organization's part to respect the multilingualism which is its rule and which it should strictly enforce would necessarily lead to the decline and impoverishment of discussions, to the development of stereotypes, to bureaucracy and to a waning of the interest of peoples in the United Nations.

It would be wrong, however, to fall into the trap of believing that such a trend is inevitable. All that is required is vigilance to insist at all times that Member States should receive from the Organization the service to which they are entitled under the constitutional texts. This means, in particular, that the Secretariat should make it a rule to employ in its relations with Member States the official language which the latter choose to use. This requirement naturally has implications in terms of the linguistic skills which should rightfully be expected from staff of the United Nations. It may be useful to recall this unequivocally.

It is noticeable that the staffing of the interpretation and translation services has not expanded at the same rate as the increase in the activities of the various United Nations bodies over the past few years. As a result, there are delays in making documents available in the official languages and meetings are postponed because of the lack of teams of interpreters. All this hampers the proper functioning of the Organization and gives the impression that the delegations which insist on having the services required for the meaningful practice of multilingualism are troublemakers who are overly intransigent. This is a very serious perversion of the system and the only way to avoid it is for the interpretation and translation services to have staff and resources which,

despite budgetary constraints, remain adequate to deal with the increasing workload.

The practice of holding "informal" meetings without interpretation or circulating "unofficial" documents in one language only can in no way be an acceptable solution to these shortcomings.

Cultural and linguistic diversity is a responsible choice which the United Nations is perfectly able to make if it exhibits in this regard the far-sightedness and determination that are necessary in order to avoid taking the easy way out. The resolution submitted by the signatories is intended precisely to recall this constant objective, this requirement which is particularly relevant at the dawn of the second fifty years of the Organization's existence.

APPENDIX

Draft resolution

Multilingualism

The General Assembly,

Recalling its resolutions 2 (I) of 1 February 1946, 2241 B (XXI) of 20 December 1966, 2292 (XXII) of 8 December 1967, 2359 B (XXII) of 19 December 1967, 2479 (XXIII) and 2480 B (XXIII) of 21 December 1968, 3189 (XXVIII), 3190 (XXVIII) and 3191 (XXVIII) of 18 December 1973 and 43/224 D of 21 December 1988,

Recalling also, on the occasion of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Charter, that the universality of the United Nations and its corollary of multilingualism require each State Member of the Organization, whatever the official or working language in which it expresses itself, to make itself understood just as it should endeavour to understand others,

Stressing the need for strict observance of the resolutions and rules establishing language arrangements for the different bodies and organs of the United Nations,

Regretting that unequal use is made of the different working languages and official languages within the United Nations, and desiring that persons recruited by the Organization should have a command of and make use of at least one working language and one official language,

Considering that the translation and interpretation budgets of United Nations bodies should be commensurate with requirements and exempt from any restrictive budgetary measures, as recalled in resolution 42/207 C of 11 December 1987,

Noting that the principle of equality of the official languages and of the working languages is being called into question with increasing frequency by the holding of so-called "reduced cost" informal meetings,

1. Invites Member States and the Secretary-General to ensure the strict application of the resolutions establishing language arrangements;

2. Recalls that the Secretariat is required, in its relations with Member States, to use the official or working language requested by these States;

3. Invites the Secretary-General to ensure that, in conformity with resolution 2480 B (XXIII), personnel recruited by the different bodies of the Organization have a command of and make use of at least one working language and one official language;

4. Stresses the need to ensure, in particular by the training and recruitment of specialists, that the necessary resources are available to guarantee the timely translation of documents into the different official and working languages of the United Nations;

5. Recalls the need to ensure the simultaneous distribution of these documents in the official and working languages of the Organization;

6. Stresses the usefulness of ensuring that adequate publications and data banks in the different official and working languages are available to the libraries and documentation centres of the various bodies;

7. Requests the delegations of Member States and the Secretariat to limit the holding of informal meetings without interpretation;

8. Requests the Secretary-General to submit to it at its fifty-second session a report on the implementation of this resolution, and on the use of the official and working languages of the United Nations.